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WITH OREGON HOP PICKERS

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While conducting an investigation ¹ into conditions of industry among young women for the National Board of the Young Women's Christian Associations I went out to the Pacific Coast to direct personally the work in that section. It had seemed well to us in making arrangements for the investigation to include hop picking in Oregon, as it furnishes a considerable field of employment to women during the month of September. Moreover, it was an hitherto unstudied industry, and yet of sufficient importance to warrant the most careful study.

Of the hop-raising states Oregon is the most important, producing in 1907 about 25,000,000 pounds as against 18,000,000 for California, 10,000,000 for New York and 8,000,000 for Washington. Before 1850 most of the hops in the country were raised in New England. During the next forty years New York produced more than all the other states combined. Now the palm goes to the Pacific Coast country, which has today 40,000 acres under hops. A generation ago it had less than 2,000. Scarcity of labor, prohibitionist agitation and worn-out soil have combined to render hop growing in New York unprofitable. The unfertilized soil of Oregon will yield twice as many pounds to the acre as the New York earth can produce aided by much fertilization.

I found that very little could be learned on the outside concerning the conditions of the work, so I decided to hire out as a picker and go with the crowd to learn something of the life at first hand. I arrived in Portland a few days before the opening of the season, which is about the first of September, and commenced to look around for work. I eagerly scanned the advertising columns of the daily papers to see if more pickers were need-

¹ The summer of 1907.

ed. My quest was soon rewarded, for I found numerous advertisements calling for help in the fields, as, for example,

WANTED.—1,000 hop pickers to pick 624 acres of hops; big crop; largest and best-equipped hop yard in Oregon; all on trellis wire; perfect accommodations; grocery store, bakery, butcher shop, barber shop, dancing pavilion 50x150 feet, telephone, physician, beautiful camping ground; 3-acre bathing pool, restaurant, provisions sold at Portland prices. We pay \$1.10 per 100 pounds; reduced excursion rates on our special train. For particulars apply to

HOP PICKERS WANTED.—We pay 50 cents per box, camp shacks free; will be at the Hotel August 25, till September 3, to sell round trip tickets to, Ore., grower.

WANTED.—Hop pickers for my yard at, Ore.; pay 50 cents per box; will be at Hotel August 25 till September 1.

HOP PICKERS.—Good camp ground, store, plenty wood, pay 50 cents per box; 55 acres. Inquire

A rather unusual kind was the following which appeared in several country newspapers:

WANTED.—1,000 pickers for . . . Hop Field. . . . We pay \$1.10 per 100 pounds. . . . Perfect accommodations, good food at city prices, free whiskey, dance five nights in the week, evangelists on Sunday and a hell of a time.

This proved most alluring and showed the cosmopolitanism of the yard. All tastes were considered. This, of course, captured me, as it did many another! I presented myself at the Portland office of what is claimed to be the largest hop field in the world and asked for employment. I was engaged on the spot and agreed to start the next morning at eight on a special train known as the "Hop Special." With a parting warning to be on time, the man in charge handed me my round trip ticket, for which I paid \$2.60, which was a little more than one fare.

I was on hand at the Union Station the following morning by half-past seven and found a motley assortment of people—my companions to be—all waiting for the "Special." There were men and women and children, scores and scores of them belonging in family groups, and, in addition, several hundred young men and women off for a lark with a chance to make

some money. Many of the families were from the country, one woman having come a distance of two hundred miles with seven children ranging in age from two to fifteen years. The other class, the unattached men and women, were mainly the city's floating working population.

It was a picturesque gathering, with an air of expectancy about it. There was to be at least a change of occupation. The weary mother from the farm would have the less onerous camp life and an opportunity to make some money in the field; the clerks and factory workers and servant girls were looking forward to freedom and a chance to form new social ties. It was a funny looking crowd as to clothes—from the somber, old-fashioned, misshapen garments of the country people to the rather loud trappings of the city girls. With these there was a decided effort to be "smart," and gay-colored sweaters, outing hats, and floating veils were much in evidence. And everybody was chewing gum!

After much delay, and picture taking and swearing, we were loaded on the train—eight hundred of us packed into twelve cars—and started for the field eighty-one miles away. The journey was a memorable one, to me at least. It was pandemonium let loose; men and boys smoked pipes and cigarettes and drank whiskey from bottles they carried with them; old men passed flasks to young boys, with voices still shrill, and they eagerly quaffed; children laughed and cried in turn according as they got what they wanted or the reverse, while young men and maidens were growing intimate at an astonishingly rapid rate; and adding to the din were the vendors of crackerjack and ham sandwiches. It all had a weird fascination for me as I traveled about from car to car, ostensibly looking for friends.

At every stop, and the stops were many through that farming country with its single track, young men fairly hurled themselves out of the cars and into the nearby orchards and gathered with a free hand apples and prunes, and this in spite of protests from the owners. These trophies they bore back to the train, bushels of them, and shared with the girls. Such generosity made for good fellowship and by the time we reached Independ-

ence, the destination of our train, couples were pillowing their heads against each other. But all this was rudely interfered with when the train stopped. We had been four hours making the journey and the end was not yet.

The next step was to load us on great springless hay racks, thirty or forty to a wagon, ranged along the sides and end with feet hanging down, while luggage was piled up in the middle. The order went forth that men must walk, while women and children would ride. This was met with groans and shouts of disapproval, but all was finally amicably settled and the long, grotesque procession started on its six-mile journey over the dusty country road. It did end at last, although I had my doubts at times if it ever would. But we were all living and able to hobble at four-thirty in the afternoon, when we were unloaded on a dusty hillside at the edge of a wood and near the hop field.

I had had nothing to eat since half-past six in the morning, so with the others I made a raid on the eating-house without delay. Then I followed the rest to arrange for my accommodation. I engaged a bed in a tent at a cost of one dollar for two for the season. I was given several yards of denim and told to make a tick, then go to a barn and fill it with fresh straw which had been brought there for that purpose. This straw tick was put on the ground in one corner of a tent to be occupied by ten of us.

When darkness came we were a weary lot and the rain was coming down, but there was a dance scheduled in the big hall and so we must forget our weariness and go. Two girls in my tent—a factory worker and a waitress—were putting on much finery for the event and asked me to go with them so I would get acquainted. I demurred a little on account of my blue calico wrapper and checked apron, but they said, “Don’t you mind; you’ll earn some money in the hops and can buy you some new clothes.” Thus was I accepted and I felt that here, at least, was true democracy. Sad to relate, the dance had to be postponed for it was found that the musical instruments had not ar-

² I had a companion with me, a young woman from the University of Oregon, whom I had engaged as an investigator.

rived. But I shall never forget that Laura and "Kid" were willing to take me and introduce me to their friends.

It was midnight before the campers were finally settled and some of them had to sleep out in the rain because they could not find their belongings. It should be explained that the great majority took their own simple outfits and so were saved expense. Pillowless straw beds are not conducive to sleep, especially with the rain coming in as it did in my corner. I hoisted an umbrella and finally slept only to dream of icebergs. The cold of those Oregon nights makes me shudder yet. The others were used to the climate and so were more comfortable than I.

Sunday was a busy day with us. We had to finish getting settled in the morning and this gave an excellent opportunity to become acquainted. The process of making friends was very simple in the unconventional atmosphere of camp life and by noon we were talking freely about the money we hoped to make in the yards³ in the next few days or weeks. We talked less readily about our past. The usual question, "Have you ever picked before?" was put to me, and after my negative reply some further facts seemed to be expected, so I volunteered the information that I had been doing various things, which was accepted for what it was worth and the matter allowed to drop, for as one woman in our tent said, with a knowing nod, "We's all done things we doesn't care to tell about." Again the democracy of the hop field triumphed and each stranger was taken on her merits, regardless of previous condition of servitude.

In the afternoon began the real business of the season—the registration of pickers and their assignment into yards and companies. That was an experience upon which I look back with horror. The boss seated himself in a narrow doorway and ordered the crowd to get in line. There were in all about a thousand people on the grounds, including those who had come in from the surrounding country, so the line soon became a sweating, swearing mob. Men crowded girls almost to suffocation

³ It may be explained here that technically the entire acreage is called a "field," while the sub-divisions for purposes of work are known as "yards." The words are often used interchangeably, however.

and when repulsed replied with insulting speech. I was within six feet of the door when registration began. In half an hour I was fully twenty feet away, with a great wall of human beings in front of me. This plainly was no place for politeness; the fight for first place there would put a Grand Street bargain-counter crush to shame and make a football hero look to his laurels. The race was not to the strong but to the canny. Gay girls soon began to pay toll in kisses or promises and were shoved up ahead. I was beaten about for over two hours and I saw women grow dizzy and faint and drop out. I grew so interested in the spectacle that I lost sight of the objective point, and that I procured a number before dark was due to the dogged persistence of one of my new friends, who handed in my name and obtained for me the coveted ribbon badge stating that my number was 185 in Yard B, Company 4. There was a different color for each yard. Mine was pink and I pinned it on with pride. Ordinary foresight would have prevented the horrors of the afternoon. It would have been so easy to have two registration booths, one for men and the other for women.

The next important event of the day was the evening service in the big dance hall conducted by the promised evangelist. Practically everybody on the ground turned out to the stereopticon lecture on the "Parables of Jesus." As many said at the door, "We'll sample it." The music seemed to meet with approval, but when the minister commenced offering a stereotyped prayer he was greeted with "cut it out," and "to the timber." He did neither, and then followed a stampede for the door by fully two-thirds of the men present. The rest of the audience engaged in conversation. The crowd sauntered in to hear the next piece of music, but when the lecture began it grew restive and soon voiced its disapproval in no uncertain terms. I was away back near the door and could see that the minister was laboring under great difficulties. The hall was very large and the acoustic properties as bad as they could possibly be and his lantern was sputtering. But worse than all this was his inability to "get next" to the situation, to use the pickers' phrase. The Parables of Jesus are interesting but not to that crowd

when clothed in the lingo of the pulpit. And then they couldn't see the whole show for the speaker was in front of the canvas. People in my neighborhood swore and laughed and yelled, but to no avail. When I suggested that some of us tell the minister to move, this was followed by a heated discussion which ended in a challenge to me. They were of one accord that "I dassen't do it." This acted as a spur and she of the blue calico wrapper and checked apron yelled out, "Get over to one side, please." The speaker fairly leaped over and the daring one was congratulated by such terms as these: "Gee, you're smarter than you look," "You kin have me for the askin'," "I'll weigh your hops heavy tomorrow;" this and more from the men; from the women around me, one and all, "Weren't you scared?" in awe-struck tones, and I said "Yes."

It was a hard audience for any speaker to satisfy but there was a remarkable opportunity for a man of power who could forget that he was a clergyman and only remember that he was a human being with a message to other human beings. Well-fed and well-dressed citizens, I notice, hear without outward sign of distress the platitudes that too often go with clerical trappings, but not so the brothers and sisters of the wage-earning class. They know a good story when they hear it and they know a good show when they see it, and they hate to be "done."

We couldn't sleep much that night for men were drinking and carousing until nearly morning and at four the first eager pickers were astir. For the real work was to begin on Monday in spite of the fact that it was Labor Day. There was so much preliminary arranging to be done that it was nine o'clock before we were finally started for our yards. But the mere picking was not of so much importance to me. I wanted to learn about the living conditions so far as young women were concerned, and I was learning of those all the time. However, it was a delight to see the various companies form and march off to victory, for everyone expected to make a lot of money—from three to seven dollars a day, I was told when I engaged work in Portland.

A hop field is a beautiful sight with its harvest of blossoms

hanging in enticing clusters on the wire trellises from twelve to fifteen feet in height. When we reached our division we were instructed to take a partner, as we were to pick two to a vine, and to provide ourselves with baskets, enormous affairs, designed to hold twenty-five pounds—and hops are very light—and a canvas bag in which to empty the baskets when full. Thus accoutered I was initiated into the mysteries of picking. One said, "Strip the vines, leaves and all;" another said, "Throw in some sand, it weighs good." But the voice of the yard boss came loud and clear, "Pick clean or you get no money."

Picking hops is fascinating and there is a tradition in Oregon that it is a most healthful occupation, but it is hard with the reaching and stooping and tramping over the rough, ploughed ground. Then the air is thick with pollen, which is supposed to be health giving, but it choked me and by dinner time I could hardly speak; but I had picked fifty-three pounds, according to the weigher, and got a coupon entitling me to fifty-six cents in cash. I worked about two hours and a half because I had to stop at half-past eleven to go up to the restaurant to wait on tables. They were short of help and offered free meals to girls who would serve for an hour. As the cost of the meal was only twenty cents the job was not in great demand; they could earn more in the field, they thought. The woman in charge of the dining-room had me marked from the first and kept asking me to help. The big and the strong evidently appealed to her. Finally I yielded and so I had to leave the field before the others to get my own dinner. I was paid in advance; I would not work on any other basis! I took no chances on getting a meal after the hungry horde was fed. The twenty-cent meal was the best for the price that I have ever seen, but in order to show its superior judgment in such matters the crowd complained over the lack of pie. They told me to "get a move on" or they'd have me "fired." At one o'clock I sat down with a girl to gloat over the seventy-six cents I had earned since breakfast and to wonder how long one could endure such weariness when the manager came along and ordered me to the kitchen to wash dishes. At

that I struck, and so did the girl with me, and we loftily "walked out."

There was much murmuring that day among the pickers because they could not make "good" money; few, if any, made over two dollars. Clean picking was regarded as a great hardship. Some girls did not make expenses. Our meals and bed cost about sixty-five cents a day. There was much dissatisfaction, too, over the fact that the weighers frequently gave the young and pretty and flirtatious girls ten or twelve pounds extra weight. There were many opportunities in the field for little courtesies of this kind and the young, attractive girl needed much wisdom not to become entangled by them. The chivalrous swain could always make excuses to pick in the admired one's basket while his own was standing empty. The wire-men⁴ and the weighers were the aristocrats of the company. They were paid by the day and went about in leisurely fashion. As they came in contact with all the girls in their division they had ample opportunity to exercise their wiles.

The field, filled with pickers, was an interesting sight. In one row a man and his wife picked together while small children crawled around in the dirt at their feet; over a little was a woman with six offspring picking in her basket; just beyond was a giddy girl with a forward boy she had met on the train—both picking away and passing cheap compliments; away to the right was a red-cheeked German girl crying already because her clumsy fingers made work slow; near her were two bright high-school girls eager to earn money for clothes; not far away was a widow of nearly fifty with her aged mother, making small headway with the hops; I taught them what I had learned and then things went better.

It was a weary, discouraged crowd that left the yards that first night. We were all tired and we had not made as much money as we had hoped. So we sat around in the tents and talked in the early evening, and later we gathered in the big tent and had an impromptu concert, which cheered us all.

⁴ Men who let down the wires holding the vines. When we wanted this done we called out, "Wire down," and eventually the man would appear.

This tent is deserving of more than passing mention, inasmuch as it represented the crystallization of a desire to improve social conditions in the field. The very progressive body of women comprising the Oregon Young Women's Christian Association desired to do what was possible to render hop picking in a big public field more respectable than it was usually considered, and for the reason that hundreds of young women in the state needed to avail themselves of its earnings but were sometimes in moral peril while so doing.

These women persuaded the hop owner to let them enter and conduct the restaurant on the grounds and maintain a social center. This appealed to him a good business proposition and he readily acceded to it. Thus it transpired that a beneficent influence was introduced into the field and received the hearty indorsement of all concerned.

The women were beset with difficulties from the beginning, but one by one they were overcome, owing chiefly to the skilful management of the one⁵ in charge of the work. Quite as interesting to me as the picking itself was the opportunity to study this experiment in leavening the crowd. One Sunday I saw a woman on the kitchen steps stoning a bushel of prunes for a pudding to lessen the burden of the cooks. I went up and offered to help her. She instructed me in the art, and while the work progressed entertained me with stories of Turkey, a country she knew well. A day or two later she settled a strike in the kitchen and still later in the season, when the cooks failed to live up to their agreement, she discharged the whole force of men, telephoned to Portland for more help and put herself in charge of the culinary department till relief came. And the pickers got their meals on time and never knew anything had happened!

This woman, who stoned prunes, settled strikes, and acted as cook, opened up the big tent at night and in an amazingly short time mustered the "talent" of the field about her and gave "concerts" that made everybody happy. Undoubtedly such an influence in the field was good and it seems desirable that this

⁵ Miss Frances Gage, state secretary of Oregon and Washington.

work should continue and be extended to all the large⁶ fields where young women go and are constantly menaced by moral dangers offset by no restraining influence. The "Association ladies" became quite popular with the girls in the field and it was interesting to notice how quickly some of them recognized the possibilities of "stylishness" in such chaperonage!

The second day of picking began at half-past four in the dim light and the dew. I was weary beyond expression for I had been helping in various ways until late the night before. Many of my friends were tired, too, so the picking went slowly in the morning. But gossip was rife, for we were getting pretty well acquainted, and we knew already that the red-cheeked, clumsy fingered, German girl, who wept as she picked the day before, had run away from her husband and baby and was not reveling in her first taste of economic independence. This and much more was talked about while the full clusters were stripped into the baskets. If gossip had been a marketable commodity there would have been no cause for complaint over small earnings that morning.

At noon I told my companions that I had made up my mind to go back to Portland that day and they immediately supposed it was because I was not making money enough. They urged me to stay, saying the picking would be better later. When they found coaxing of no avail, they showed their friendliness by anxiously asking if I had enough money to take me home. And so I went away, weary of body, to keep an appointment very different in character two hundred miles from there, my identity unsuspected.

The following table contains facts learned from twenty-seven of my companions and may be of interest. This group is quite characteristic, strange mixture though it is.

I carried away from the hop field a very real interest in all that pertains to the welfare of Oregon hop pickers. Unquestionably, certain improvements could be made in the organiza-

⁶ There are in addition many "family yards" employing "neighbors" which do not present the problems of the large field with its varied assortment of pickers.

tion of the army of workers and in the policing ⁷ of the grounds. Employers should be urged to make these changes and to do all

Name	Nationality	Age	Home	Permanent Occupation	Reason for Coming to Hop Field
N. J.	American	17	Portland	Student	Health
M. D.	American	38	Antelope	Nurse	Profitable vacation
L. T.	American	22	Portland	Garment maker	Good time
A. H. ...	American	20	N. Lewis River, Wash	Waitress	Good time
E. S.	German	17	Portland	Student	To make money
J. J.	American	15	Portland	Student	Health
M. G.	German	50	Salem	Farmer's wife	Outing for family
E. M. ...	German	15	Portland	Student	To earn money for clothes
K. L. ...	American	26	Portland	Laundress	To make all she could by whatever means
M. J. ...	American	50	Portland	Nurse	Health and rest
G. W.	German	17	Portland	Waitress	To make money
B. M. ...	American	25	Portland	Waitress	Change
M. S. ...	Swede	45	Astoria	Housewife	"Just took a notion to come"
J. N.	American	17	Portland	Shop girl	To have good time
N. C. ...	American	17	Portland	Shop girl	To have good time
M. B. ...	German	20	Portland	Housewife	Ran away from home
A. I. ...	American	18	Portland	Shop girl	To have a change
J. L.	American	19	Portland	Factory girl	To make money
L. K. ...	German	22	Portland	Factory girl	To have outing
K. M. ...	German	21	Portland	Cook	To meet nice men
A. A. ...	American	16	Portland	Student	To earn money
J. G.	Swede	21	Portland	Housewife	To have a change
O. L. ...	American	15	Portland	Student	To earn money for clothes
J. L.	American	40	Astoria	Housewife	To earn money for children
M. M. ...	American	32	Astoria	Housewife	To earn money for children
G. H. ...	American	25	Portland	Factory girl	To have outing
J. G.	German	26	Portland	Shop girl	To have outing

in their power to banish lawlessness. It is true they meet with some difficulties unknown to other employers owing to the character of the industry. They are obliged to take the class of people they can get, perhaps to a greater extent than others, and many of these are likely to be thriftless or of more or less vicious habits and thus difficult to control. This is particularly true of the young men, who, in turn, exercise a very decided influence over the young women.

Changes might also be made in the pastimes of the crowd.

⁷ One sheriff was there to keep that riotous throng in order.

Their desire for amusement after a monotonous day in the field is legitimate and should be gratified, and the experiment of the Young Women's Christian Association would seem to indicate that wholesome entertainments would be appreciated by the majority. It would be unreasonable to expect such a company to settle down to quiet at dark, satisfied with only the work. Human beings are not so constructed, for frequently the longest days of monotonous toil seem to demand nights of exciting pleasure. The factory girl in the city will dance till daylight after a hard day's work and feel that only with such relaxation is life worth living. How much more, then, will such people as gather in a hop yard, with the spirit of an outing upon them, need to be amused. If nothing better be provided, the saloon and dance hall will satisfy the craving.

The chief needs of the hop fields, then, as I observed them, are better organization and more wholesome recreation. The one could be cared for by the owner, the other by some outside group interested in social welfare, and I earnestly hope that both these needs will be met in the near future.

As the hop season returns I shall want to journey out to Oregon and don the calico frock and apron, with the picker's stout gloves and neck-kerchief, to sleep again on the bed of straw and rise in the dawn to help harvest the blossoms, and even to endure again the cruel weariness it implies, to enjoy the true democracy of the motley crowd, and to watch the future realization of betterment efforts.

Long live the Oregon hop pickers!